COMMAS WITH COORDINATE ADJECTIVES

Rules by AP Stylebook, Bad Grammar/Good Punctuation,
Chicago Manual of Style, Gregg Reference Manual, and Morson’s

AP STYLEBOOK

WITH EQUAL ADJECTIVES: Use commas to separate a series of adjectives equal in rank. If the commas could be replaced by the word and without changing the sense, the adjectives are equal: a thoughtful, precise manner; a dark, dangerous street.

Use no comma when the last adjective before a noun outranks its predecessors because it is an integral element of a noun phrase, which is the equivalent of a single noun: a cheap fur coat (the noun phrase is fur coat); the old oaken bucket; a new, blue spring bonnet.

BAD GRAMMAR/GOOD PUNCTUATION

From Bad Grammar/Good Punctuation:

Coordinate adjectives: Coordinate adjectives are two more direct adjectives that modify a noun with equal emphasis or equal value.

* He was a genuine, down-to-earth kind of guy.
* She used effectives, valuable contributions.
* It was a firm, hard lump that she felt.

Separating Comma.12: Use a separating comma between coordinate adjectives.

* She was a competent, efficient worker.
* It was a conspicuous, obvious move on his part.
* I believe it is a clean, safe water supply.

To be considered "coordinate," the adjectives must modify more or less the same quality of the noun; in other words, the adjectives are usually synonyms or are very close in meaning.

One test to check whether the comma is correct is to reverse the order of the adjectives. If the order is absolutely arbitrary -- that is, it does not matter which one comes first -- the comma is needed.

* It had been a difficult, taxing day.
* It had been a taxing, difficult day.
* I would say he is a handsome, attractive man.
  * I would say he is an attractive, handsome man.

* He was an active, energetic administrator.
  * He was an energetic, active administrator.

Another way to check is to insert the word "and" in between the two adjectives. If the words make sense with "and" between them and again the order doesn't matter, there should be a comma between the two adjectives.

* She had an elegant, polished air about her.
  * She had an elegant and polished air about her.
  * She had a polished and elegant air about her.

* It was a moderate, sensible plan.
  * It was a moderate and sensible plan.
  * It was a sensible and moderate plan.

If the order is not arbitrary and if the words cannot be reversed or have the word "and" inserted between them, they are not considered coordinate adjectives and do not take a comma.

When more than one adjective comes in front of a noun, there are other possibilities for punctuation. If two or more words form a unit in front of a noun, they are hyphenated.

* My long-awaited promoted finally materialized.
  * It was an impressive-looking office.
  * He objected to the installation of wall-to-wall carpeting in the room.

**Hyphen.27**: If two or more words do not form a unit but modify the noun separately, do not use a hyphen between them.

* It was a large black cabinet. "(Large" and "black" modify "cabinet" separately.)
  * She was a small older woman. ("Small" and "older" modify "woman" separately.)
  * They had their last meeting in November. ("Their" and "last" modify "meeting" separately.)

If each word modifies the noun on its own and makes sense without the other, then the words do not form a unit. Look at this sentence:

* What I saw was a big green bug.

It is a "big bug," and it is a "green bug." Therefore, no hyphen is required between "big" and "green."
Another way to look at it is that, if you are going to hyphenate, then the hyphenated combination should make sense as a unit. In the prior sentence, "big green" is not a unit. It doesn't mean anything. Look at this sentence:

* She wanted a sunny breakfast room at the back of the house.
"Sunny" and "breakfast" do not take a hyphen because they are not a unit. There is no such thing as a "sunny breakfast."

This is the pattern here: First, it is a "room"; then it is a "breakfast room." Then it is a "breakfast room" that is "sunny." The closest adjective modifies the noun; the second adjective modifies the concept of the first adjective and the noun together. This is a pattern that repeats often in English.

* They offered immediate roadside assistance.
It is not an "immediate roadside." It is "roadside assistance" that is "immediate."

* It is a set dollar amount.
It is not a "set dollar." It is a "dollar amount" that is "set."

* It is a good family photo.
Though it might be a good family, that is not the point in this sentence. It is a "family photo" that is "good."

CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE (16TH EDITION)

5.90 Coordinate adjectives
A coordinate adjective is one that appears in a sequence with one or more related adjectives to modify the same noun. Coordinate adjectives should be separated by commas or by and {skilled, experienced chess player} {nurturing and loving parent}. But if one adjective modifies the noun and another adjective modifies the idea expressed by the combination of the first adjective and the noun, the adjectives are not considered coordinate and should not be separated by a comma. For example, a lethargic soccer player describes a soccer player who is lethargic. Likewise, phrases such as red brick house and wrinkled canvas jacket are unpunctuated because the adjectives are not coordinate: they have no logical connection in sense (a red house could be made of many different materials; so could a wrinkled jacket). The most useful test is this: if and would fit between the two adjectives, a comma is necessary.

6.33 Commas with coordinate adjectives
As a general rule, when a noun is preceded by two or more adjectives that could, without affecting the meaning, be joined by and, the adjectives are normally separated by commas. Such adjectives, which are called coordinate adjectives, can also usually be reversed in order and still make sense. If, on the other hand, the adjectives are not coordinate—that is, if one or more of the adjectives is essential to (i.e., forms a unit with) the noun being modified—no commas are used.
Shelly had proved a faithful, sincere friend. (Shelly’s friendship has proved faithful and sincere.)
It is going to be a long, hot, exhausting summer. (The summer is going to be long and hot and exhausting.)
She has a young, good-looking friend. (Her friend is young and good-looking.)
but
She has many young friends.
He has rejected traditional religious affiliations.
She opted for an inexpensive quartz watch.

6.34 Commas with repeated adjectives
When an adjective is repeated before a noun, a comma normally appears between the pair.
   Many, many people have enjoyed the book.

GREGG REFERENCE MANUAL (NINTH EDITION)

123c. Use a comma to separate two or more adjectives that modify the same noun.
   Gillian is a thoughtful, considerate person.
   But: I would like to thank you for your thoughtful editorial comments.

GREGG REFERENCE MANUAL (TENTH EDITION)

827 a. Do not hyphenate independent adjectives preceding a noun.
   A long and tiring trip (long and tiring each modify trip)
   A warm, enthusiastic reception (warm and enthusiastic each modify reception; a comma marks the omission of and)
   A distinguished public orator (public modifies orator; distinguished modifies public orator)

MORSON’S

RULE 46
Use a comma to separate a series of adjectives when the adjectives are of equal rank in relation to the noun they describe.

EXAMPLES
   a. They traveled a rough, rocky road before they could settle this matter.
b. He was a troubled, vicious youth.

NOTE
If and can be placed between the two adjectives without changing the meaning and if reversing the order of the adjectives does not affect the naturalness of the sentence, use the comma. If this test does not work, do not use the comma.

EXAMPLES
   c. A small, sickly man appeared at the door.
   d. A small gold key was on the chain.